

J.W. Ledbetter is Executive Director of the Mississippi Office of Homeland Security. / Vickie D. King/ The Clarion-Ledger, Sunday, August 21, 2011: Editorial Director David Hampton



After graduating from the University of Southern Mississippi with a degree in criminal justice, I took a position with the Madison County Sheriff's Office. I gained law enforcement experience in investigations and prosecution. I helped organize and supervise the dive rescue team serving as one of two team leaders. In 1993, I became the Mississippi Gaming Commission's first director of enforcement, and during the next 12 years served as its director of investigations, director of intelligence and director of criminal investigations. In 2006, Gov. Haley Barbour and then Commissioner of Public Safety George Phillips asked me to lead the state Office of Homeland Security.

What is the mission of the Office of Homeland Security?

To prevent terrorism, deter criminal activity, protect lives and safeguard property. We partner with public and private sector stakeholders to prepare an effective emergency response, while sharing critical information in a timely manner. We fund, train and help organize first responders with the capabilities to respond to any significant event, whether it's a natural disaster, terrorist strike or accidental chemical spill on an interstate. We also oversee our state's intelligence fusion center.

Does Mississippi face threats from terrorism? What would be potential targets?

Mississippi isn't a "Tier 1" target state with large population centers like New York, or symbolic objectives like Washington, D.C., but we do possess significant infrastructure. We have a nuclear power facility that contributes to the national grid. We are the 13th ranked provider of crude oil to the country with over 1,500 producing wells. Mississippi alone has over 14,000 miles of underground pipeline. The petrochemical assets, transmission pipelines

and injector stations in Mississippi are absolutely mission-critical to military and emergency operations throughout the nation. Our state also produces MRAP vehicles in West Point for the Marines, nuclear submarines in Pascagoula for

the Navy, and helicopters in Columbus for the Army. A secluded facility in Hancock County trains over 200 Navy SEALs every year. Mississippi's contributions to our country's security are significant, and we have an abundance of critical and key assets worth protecting.

One problem identified after 9-11 was the lack of communication. What is being done to improve that?

Our office funds and supports the Mississippi Analysis and Information Center, our designated fusion center. MSAIC is a collaboration of federal, state, local, tribal and private-sector stakeholders all coming together for a common goal - to keep the law enforcement and first responder community advised of any significant information. We sponsor an outreach arm for the fusion center, the Mississippi Information Liaison Officer Program. To date, we've trained over 100 MILOs. To share information with law enforcement and first responders we utilize HSIN, the Homeland Security Information Network, a secure, Internet-based, audio/video capability. Our office also coordinates closely with the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force.

Are local law enforcement agencies prepared for dealing with terrorism? How does your agency help?

Homeland security begins with hometown security. The law enforcement community in Mississippi is better equipped and trained today than ever before. In the last year, our agency has distributed approximately \$6.5 million in Homeland Security grants to Mississippi law enforcement and first responders. Our office helps fund and train FBI-certified Bomb Teams in Gulfport, Tupelo, Clinton and Jackson. Our office sponsors "active shooter" training for law enforcement officers and has trained over 150 instructors and certified over 5,000 officers. Our office coordinates advanced training for qualified personnel by sending first responders to national training centers around the country. Our fusion center disseminates alerts and officer safety bulletins to law enforcement agencies statewide.

What is considered suspicious activity?

Suspicious activity tends to change somewhat with the locale. There are, however, a few common "red flags" that everyone should know about: Anytime you notice someone showing unusual interest in public utilities, or governmental buildings; you may notice an unusual purchase, or delivery of poisonous or flammable chemicals, weapons or even public-service uniforms; you notice surveillance activities, monitoring activities, or video taping of any potential target; or you notice individuals who appear to engage in tests of security procedures or "dry runs" of potential targets. Any of these should cause concern. We've set up a suspicious activity reporting tip line, 888-4 SAFE MS, to immediately address any concerns.

What has most influenced you in your career?

Outside my family and close friends, the people who influenced me most in my career were Madison County Sheriff Billy Noble and Canton Police Chief Bobby Winters. Both of these gentlemen took me under their wing and made sure I knew what the job of law enforcement was really about. I couldn't have found two better friends and mentors. They both welcomed me into their homes as well as their profession. The many deputies and policemen I worked with in the early days all helped me get to where I am today.

There have been concerns that Americans are trading freedoms for security. Have we? Where is the balance?

The Patriot Act and other homeland security measures often involve us attempting to strike a balance between greater security and constriction of our civil liberties. We all want law enforcement to investigate and deter terrorist threats, but at the same time, nobody wants to live in a "police state." Coming to an equitable balance is no easy task, legally, practically or morally. I know many people are concerned that "information gathering" has a potential for

abuse. And that's a valid concern. I can tell you that on a statewide and national level as well, safeguards are in place to keep this from happening.

We are approaching another anniversary of 9-11. Where are we a decade later ?

We're smarter, better trained, better equipped, and better organized. Today Mississippi has in place three independent task forces capable of responding with 100 fire-rescue personnel each. Every task force is made up of volunteers from 27 counties, and certified to the FEMA Type II Response Task Force level. Every task force is fully equipped and self-sufficient for at least 72 hours with a full communications suite, capable of talking across the spectrum. Every task force has swift water and rescue boat capability and a logistics contingent that can deploy ahead of the task force. Our office has established four "strike teams," 75 sworn personnel each, which can deploy independently or accompany the task force. We have in place a near-complete \$200 million dollar 700 MHz statewide radio system designed for first responders. Police, fire and rescue personnel from one city or county can now talk to each other when they need to. Now during times of crises, for the very first time we have full interoperability with surrounding states' first responders.

What should Americans consider looking back at 9-11?

Mississippi expects and deserves a posture of preparedness against all hazards, natural and man-made. We learned from 9-11 that those who wish to destroy our country and our way of life are patient. We must counter that patience with unending vigilance and continuous improvement. We are committed to careful investment in capabilities that make sense. We are training and developing a skilled cadre of professionals in first response. As we reflect back on the events of 9-11-01, we also should realize this date represents an opportunity for those who wish harm to our country. Violent extremists historically attach significance to these symbolic dates.

- Editorial Director David Hampton

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